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## Chapter Nine Socratic Intellectualism<sup>1</sup>

*Alexander Nehamas*

And yet not once did he profess to be a teacher of virtue; still, being so obviously virtuous himself, he made those who spent time with him hope that by acting like him they too would become virtuous.

Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.ii.3

Apart from the legal charges which Plato may or may not have refuted in the *Apology*, a philosophical charge against Socrates still remains. It is, appropriately, an ancient charge (*Ap.* 18b-c), first and most crudely made in Aristophanes' *Clouds*. Plato may have also made it himself when, in the *Republic*, he divided the human soul into different capacities, not all of them rational, and offered a detailed program designed to educate and bring them into harmony with one another. Plato's implicit criticism was, characteristically, made explicit by Aristotle (*EE* I. 7, 1216b3-26; *EN* VI. 13, 1144b17-30). And George Grote both expressed the consensus of the ages and set the stage for modern attitudes toward Socrates when he attributed to him "the error ... of dwelling exclusively on the intellectual conditions of human conduct, and omitting to give proper attention to the emotional and volitional."<sup>2</sup>

Socrates' intellectualism has proved to be a spur as well as a hurdle to our understanding him. How could such a supremely intelligent man fail to realize that intelligence is not enough for

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1. For comments on earlier versions of this paper, I am grateful to Richard Kraut, Amélie Rorty, Steven Strange, and Gregory Vlastos.

2. George Grote, *Plato and the Other Companions of Sokrates* (London: Murray, 1875), vol. I, p. 399.

being good and, as it followed for him, for being happy?<sup>3</sup> Given his own view that to commit injustice is to harm oneself (*Ap.* 30c5-d5), how could it be that "he had no suspicion of the extent to which his mental superiority had raised fear and hatred against him in the hearts of men towards whom he was conscious of nothing but good will and good service"<sup>4</sup> and that he therefore may have after all, though perhaps inadvertently, harmed them himself?

How could someone learn to live the life of reason, virtue, and happiness Socrates praised (and did Socrates himself live that way)? Does Socrates offer us a moral philosophy? Plato's early dialogues suggest that Socrates believed that to live the good life, we must first learn what virtue is. To act virtuously, we must know the definition of virtue. But this may present another serious problem. On an ethical level, it may seem that knowledge of what is good is not sufficient to make us do it. On a logical and metaphysical level, it may now appear, Socrates' belief in "the priority of definition" may make it impossible to acquire that knowledge in the first place. Socrates' refusal to look at concrete cases of action, and to learn about the virtues from them, it has been thought, is yet another instance of his "despotic" intellectualism.<sup>5</sup>

The problem, then, seems to be this. Socrates' ethical intellectualism makes him believe that once people acquire knowledge of virtue, they will be able to tell what the good thing to do is in all circumstances, and will in fact do it. They will therefore always act well and be happy. But the transition from knowledge to action

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3. A recent discussion of the complexities of the relationship between virtue and happiness in Socrates' thought, rejecting the view that the two are identical but also correctly insisting that virtue is not simply instrumental to happiness, can be found in Gregory Vlastos, "Happiness and Virtue in Socrates' Moral Theory," *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*, 210 (N.S. 30, 1984), pp. 181-213.

4. George Bernard Shaw, Preface to *Saint Joan* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1957), p. 8.

5. The word is taken over from Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, Sec. 15, and used in a different context, by Gregory Vlastos, "The Paradox of Socrates," in his *Socrates: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), p. 17; hereafter referred to as "PS."

seems highly doubtful. In addition, his definitional intellectualism, his view that knowledge of the definition of virtue is necessary in order to tell what the good thing to do is, seems to make the acquisition of the knowledge necessary for the good life impossible. The Socratic project of teaching people how to be good appears to fail at two crucial places: it considers a certain knowledge sufficient for right action when it is not, and it makes the acquisition of that knowledge impossible in the first place.

## I

We will first turn to this latter problem, which, if it is real, undermines the whole Socratic project. Readers of Plato's early dialogues are universally agreed that Socrates believes that definition is prior to *something*.<sup>6</sup> But various and conflicting answers have been given to the question of precisely what it is that the definition is prior to. In what follows, I shall offer my own answer to that question. I will argue that little, if anything, is wrong with Socrates' view on this issue. And I will suggest that this problem is deeply connected with the question of moral education, with which our discussion began.

One way of interpreting the priority of definition is to take it as the view that if one does not know, say, the definition of piety, then one is never in a position to tell whether any individual person or action is or is not pious. If we add to this the idea that it is impossible to arrive at the definition of piety through an examination of specific examples of pious actions or pious people, it is easy to see that this principle is vicious. If you cannot recognize cases of piety without knowing what piety is, then how can you appeal to such cases in order to arrive at that knowledge? Wittgenstein criticized both Plato and Socrates for accepting this view,<sup>7</sup> and the criticism became broadly known as "the Socratic fallacy" when Peter Geach claimed to locate it in the *Euthyphro* and described it as the assumption

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6. The principle of the priority of definition also seems accepted in the late *Theaetetus* (146c ff.). Plato's reversion to the Socratic form in this work is significant; cf. my "*Episteme* and *Logos* in Plato's Later Thought," *Archiv Für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 66 (1984), pp. 11-36.

7. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 20; cf. John McDowell, *Plato: "Theaetetus"* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 115.

- (A) that if you know you are correctly predicating a given term 'T' you must know "what it is to be T," in the sense of being able to give a general criterion of a thing's being T;  
(B) that it is no use to try and arrive at the meaning of 'T' by citing examples of things that are T.<sup>8</sup>

Now, at least in connection with the *Euthyphro*, it can be shown that Socrates does not endorse this unacceptable principle. He makes, instead, a much weaker claim. This is that if Euthyphro is convinced that his highly controversial legal action against his father (the shocking nature of which Plato clearly underscores: *Eu.* 4a11, b4-6, e4-9) is in fact pious, then he is bound to have an account of piety which justifies his confidence. Socrates need not depend on general principles in order to ask for a definition in this case. His request is a dialectically motivated and reasonable response to Euthyphro's startling claim that he feels as secure as he claims to be in prosecuting his own father on a

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8. P. T. Geach, "Plato's *Euthyphro*: An Analysis and Commentary," *The Monist*, 50 (1966), pp. 369-382. The quotation comes from p. 371. Geach's view has been anticipated by W. D. Ross, *Plato's Theory of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), p. 16, as well as by Richard Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), pp. 51-53.

murder charge.<sup>9</sup> But Geach's charge, as we shall soon see, can be refuted on more general grounds in any case.

A second way of construing the priority of definition concerns further features of the very object we are trying to define and not instances in which a virtue is or is not manifested. Terence Irwin, for example, writes that at *M.* 71b1-8 "Socrates insists as usual that a definition of virtue is prior to any knowledge of what it is like."<sup>10</sup> This principle, too, can be stated so that learning is impossible. For if no features of a virtue can guide us in our effort to define it, how can we have even the faintest idea of what it is that we are trying to define in the first place?

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9. I have given a detailed argument for this view in "Confusing Universals and Particulars in Plato's Early Dialogues," *Review of Metaphysics*, 29 (1975), pp. 287-306, esp. pp. 288-294. A slightly different defense of Socrates had been offered by Gerasimos Santas, "The Socratic Fallacy," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 10 (1972), pp. 127-141 (Santas later modified his view; I discuss it below). M. F. Burnyeat argued that Santas' view of Socrates' reliance on examples as data from which definitions can be reached is wrong on the grounds that Socrates considers examples to be as disputable as definitions. Socrates, Burnyeat writes, wants to know what piety is "in order to be able to tell what is an instance of the concept and what is not," in "Examples in Epistemology: Socrates, Theaetetus and G. E. Moore," *Philosophy*, 52 (1977), pp. 381-398, p. 386. But the statement to which Burnyeat refers to support his view, *Eu.* 6e5-6, need not be read as claiming that a definition is necessary in order to tell whether *anything* is or is not pious. More weakly, and more plausibly, it can be taken to assert that if we have the definition we shall be able to tell in *every* case whether we do or do not have an instance of piety. Burnyeat's own view, though not central to his concern in this article and though more dialectical than theirs, is related to those of Irwin, Woodruff, and of Santas' later *Socrates*, which I discuss below.

10. Terence Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory: The Early and Middle Dialogues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 133, referred to as "PMT" below. These two versions of the thesis of the priority of definition are not always clearly distinguished. I tried to do so in a note which will appear in the *Proceedings of the Second International Symposium of Philosophy*, held in Athens in 1984. The distinction is now drawn by Gregory Vlastos in "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge," *Philosophical Quarterly*, (1985), pp. 1-31: cf. p.26 and n. 65. Hereafter referred to as "SDK."

We should take a good look at the *Meno*. For Socrates offers an example of what he means when he says that, not knowing what virtue is, he also does not know if it is teachable or, more generally, what sort of thing it is (ὁποῖόν τι). This is the famous case of Meno himself, and it repays close attention:

Do you think that it is possible for someone who is altogether ignorant of who Meno is to know if he is noble, wealthy or high-born, or the opposite of these? (71b4-7)<sup>11</sup>

The traditional reading of this passage depends on attributing to Plato, and agreeing with, the view that "knowing Meno" is of course a matter of acquaintance."<sup>12</sup> The example is then taken to be an illustration of the Platonic theory that some sort of intellectual acquaintance with the Forms is necessary if we are to have any knowledge of them at all.<sup>13</sup>

Serious doubts about whether Plato ever held this theory have been consistently raised.<sup>14</sup> These may or may not be justified, though I personally believe they are. But we should concentrate on the specific example at hand before we examine such general claims. And in connection with this example it is crucial to notice that, given Bluck's interpretation, what Socrates says about Meno is obviously and strikingly wrong. Being acquainted with Meno is neither necessary for knowing whether he is rich (since we can know this without being acquainted with him) nor sufficient for such knowledge (since we can be acquainted with him and still have no idea of his wealth). If Socrates is trying to

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11. I have stressed the importance of the qualification "altogether" (τὸ πᾶράπαν) in this passage, as well as in the closely connected text of 71a6-7, 63, 80b4, d4-5 in "Meno's Paradox and Socrates as a Teacher," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 3 (1985), pp. 1-30, esp. pp. 3-4, 6-7. The present discussion amplifies, and partly modifies, my remarks on pp. 5-6 and n. 17.

12. R.S. Bluck, *Plato's Meno*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), p. 213.

13. Bluck, *Plato's Meno*, p. 214.

14. For example, by M. F. Burnyeat, "The Simple and the Complex in the *Theaetetus*," unpublished manuscript, 1970, and Gail J. Fine, "Knowledge and Logos in the *Theaetetus*," *Philosophical Review*, 88 (1979), pp. 366-397.



show that we need to be directly acquainted with an object before we can know what any of its features are, then he has chosen a very bad example indeed.<sup>15</sup>

What, then, is the point of the example, and what does it show about the priority of definition? Before I offer my own answer to these questions I would like to consider what has recently emerged as the most popular response to Geach's charge against Plato. This response depends essentially on drawing a sharp distinction between knowledge and true belief. If Socrates observes this distinction, whether or not he draws it explicitly, then, as Irwin writes, he

can insist that without knowledge of what virtue is we cannot have fully justified beliefs [i.e., knowledge] about virtue, and still allow us true beliefs to recognize examples of virtue. ... He allows both his interlocutors and himself true beliefs without knowledge. (PMT, p. 41)

According to this interpretation, the definition of virtue (or anything else) is prior to *knowledge* of its properties or instances. But we can have *true beliefs* about these before we know the definition. These beliefs, though not "fully justified," can guide us in our effort to reach the definition, and Geach's charge is defused.

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15. Consider also the following point. If Socrates' example is supposed to illustrate a technical philosophical position concerning the necessity of direct acquaintance with intelligible objects, as Bluck maintains, it becomes difficult to explain why Meno is so willing to accept it (cf. οὐκ ἔμολγε., 71b9). Even if Meno accepts the example itself as an accurate account of everyday situations (which, as we have just shown, it is not), he should still need much better reason in order to agree that it applies to the case of the controversial abstract objects which Socrates is allegedly introducing along with his controversial epistemology. Meno is not generally easy to convince, and he is one of Socrates' less malleable interlocutors. He is often unwilling to accept Socrates' philosophical views without argument (cf. 73a4-5, on the unity of virtue). His easy and casually offered assent in the present instance should make us pause before we agree that Socrates is making such a controversial point -- especially if, as Bluck believes, this is the first time the idea is broached in Plato's dialogues.

This defense is also offered now by Gerasimos Santas, who distinguishes two assumptions Socrates might have made.<sup>16</sup> The first is that "knowledge of the definition of, say, courage is a necessary condition for knowing that a given action is courageous." The second is the much stronger view that such knowledge "is a necessary condition for judging or believing that a given act is courageous." Socrates, Santas argues, may have possibly held the first view but he "certainly does not hold" the second. And it is, of course, only the second that would give rise to "the Socratic fallacy." Santas attributes the first assumption to Socrates on the basis of the *Hippias Major* (286c) and the *Lysis* (223b). But he admits that these passages, which we shall examine soon and interpret quite differently, "are not in the least conclusive."

Santas' and Irwin's response is without question formally correct: it extricates Socrates from Geach's difficulties. But is it what Plato's texts require? The point is not simply that Socrates does not himself draw the distinction between knowledge and belief on which this solution depends -- a distinction which in fact belongs among the factors which characterize Plato's middle, post-Socratic thought and which is actually first encountered toward the very end of the *Meno* itself (96c ff.).<sup>17</sup> This, though surely relevant, is not sufficient reason for rejecting this approach.<sup>18</sup>

The real question is whether we need this solution at all -- whether Socrates' method creates a problem which calls for a

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16. Gerasimos Xenophon Santas, *Socrates: Philosophy in Plato's Early Dialogues* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 311 n.26.

17. The distinction between knowledge and true belief can also be found at *G.* 454d. The *Gorgias* seems to be contemporary with the *Meno*: it plays for Socrates' moral philosophy the role the *Meno* plays for his methodology. Both dialogues signal Plato's departure from, or perhaps generalization of, Socrates' approach to inquiry. The methodological orientation of the *Meno* naturally gives the distinction between knowledge and true belief a more prominent role.

18. As Irwin (PMT, p. 294 n.4) remarks, even if the distinction is not explicitly drawn in Plato's early dialogues, Socrates may still be consistently observing it in practice.

solution in the first place. We would need this approach,<sup>19</sup> whatever distinctions Socrates did or did not explicitly draw, if we accepted the assumption, which Geach's opponents freely grant him, that Socrates "often ... says or implies that we cannot know anything about, say, virtue until we know what virtue is."<sup>20</sup> This is the assumption that Socrates is making a general logical or epistemological point: for any property *F* which is true of any object *a*, we cannot have any knowledge regarding *F* and its application to *a* unless we already know the definition of *a*. The case of virtue is a special instance of this general principle. And indeed the passage to which Irwin appeals as evidence for this principle, "How could I know what sort of thing something is when I don't know what it is?" (ὁ δὲ μὴ οἶδ᾽ αὖ τί ἐστίν, πῶς ἂν ὁποῖόν γέ τι εἰδείην;, *M.* 71b3-4) appears general enough to support this unrestricted view.

And yet the distinction between knowledge and belief does not apply well to the case of Meno, which is immediately offered as an illustration of this general statement (71b4-8). For it is quite unclear that, in the technical philosophical sense of these terms, any sensible object, Meno included, could ever be either known or defined. It is, I think, much more plausible to believe that Plato is making a simpler and more intuitive point through his example.<sup>21</sup>

This point would be just that someone who does not in any way (τὸ παρὰπαν) know who Meno is will also not know whether he is noble, wealthy, or high-born. Plato selects the relevant features of Meno quite carefully; they do not constitute a haphazard list. In particular, καλός must not be taken as "beautiful"; this encourages the idea that you must see (be acquainted with) Meno before you can decide whether he is handsome or not. The word is equally connected with the idea of nobility. All the features Plato mentions here belong to Meno as a function of his social position. To know whether they are true of him it is necessary to know "who Meno is" in the everyday sense,

19. Recently also accepted by Paul Woodruff, *Plato: "Hippias Major"* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1982), pp. 140-141.

20. Irwin, *PMT*, p. 40; cf. p. 294 n.4.

21. Cf. nn. 1 and 5 above.

absolutely basic to Greek views of who people are, of knowing his geographical, familial, and social origins. If Meno does have an "essence," this is an intuitively obvious one: it is his provenance. And knowing this is indeed necessary in order to know (in any sense you like) whether nobility, wealth, and a distinguished birth, all of which are a function of his provenance and to that extent "essential" to him, do or do not belong to him.<sup>22</sup>

Socrates' example, I would therefore like to suggest, is not profoundly philosophical. Meno is perfectly willing to accept it as it concerns himself and he seems equally willing to accept the principle Socrates' conditional is intended to illustrate. What he does refuse to believe is that Socrates is in fact ignorant of the nature of virtue (71b9-c2). But what exactly is the principle which Socrates illustrates by his claim that if he didn't know who Meno was he also wouldn't know whether he was noble, rich, or high-born? How broad and unrestricted is that principle?

The sentence "How could I know what sort of thing something is when I don't know what it is?" (M.71b3-4), taken by itself, is quite general. It may seem to apply to all the features of virtue and, indeed, of everything else: it sounds like an unrestricted philosophical principle. Yet it is made in a very specific context. And this context, together with the force of the example through which Socrates illustrates the principle, places severe limits on the range of features of virtue about which he claims to be ignorant as long as he is also ignorant of its definition.

The *Meno* is essentially concerned with the question whether or not virtue can be taught, and this is the issue explicitly under discussion here. We could now say that whether or not virtue is teachable is as *disputable* a question as the question of what constitutes its essence. Alternatively, we could say that it is a feature which, whether or not it is strictly speaking *essential*,

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22. Anna Greco and Steven Strange helped me to see the import of Socrates' example in this way.

belongs to virtue directly on account of what the essence of virtue is.<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps, then, Socrates' claim is more restricted than Geach thought and not subject to the difficulties from which Irwin, Santas, and Woodruff, who all accept Geach's assumption, try to protect it. In light of what we have seen so far, we may attribute to Socrates the modest claim that there are *some* features of virtue (those which are as disputable as its definition or essentially connected with it) about which he can have no knowledge, or any other cognitive attitude, without first knowing what virtue itself is. The unrestricted appearance of the principle of *Meno* 71b3-4 is not by itself sufficient to attribute to Plato the unrestricted view we have been discussing.<sup>24</sup> The view he holds cannot be determined by general consideration. We must take a close look at Plato's actual practice.

The following three passages are always cited in support of the view that Socrates accepts the unrestricted principle:

For if we did not in any way (τὸ παρὰπαν) know what virtue is, how could we possibly advise anyone about how best to acquire it? (*La.* 190b8-c2)<sup>25</sup>

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23. If virtue is (essentially) knowledge and knowledge is (essentially) teachable (*M.* 86c5-6, *Pr.* 361b1-3; cf. *EN* VI.3, 1139b25-26), then its teachability is straightforwardly one of its essential features. But we could relax the connection between virtue and knowledge and still maintain that the latter is essential to the former. Such a view, harking back to, but also differing from, that of Aristotle has been recently accepted, in general terms, by Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 48.

24. This, of course, is the import of my argument concerning the example of *Meno*. In addition, Plato often offers views which seem to be perfectly general but which, the context shows, he understands in restrictive ways. This is particularly true of his specifications of the domain of the Forms, which I discuss in "Predication and Forms of Opposites in the *Phaedo*," *Review of Metaphysics*, 26 (1973), pp. 461-491.

25. Cited as such evidence by Irwin, *PMT*, pp. 40, 294 n. 4.

Now ... I would like to have all this well explained and to also discuss what virtue is and again consider whether it is or is not teachable. (*Pr.* 361c2-6)<sup>26</sup>

We shall have clear knowledge about it when, before we try to determine how it comes to be present to people, we first try to discover what virtue itself is (*M.*100b4-6)<sup>27</sup>

It is a remarkable, though not sufficiently remarked, fact that these three passages all concern the very same question. This is just the question discussed at the opening of the *Meno*, namely, How is virtue acquired?, and of which the problem whether it can be taught is a special case. Plato does not seem concerned with arbitrary features of virtue, and he seems even less concerned with features of arbitrary objects. Socrates is raising a very special problem: the fact that, as he believes, it is necessary to know what virtue is before we can tell how it is acquired. His view, in my opinion, is very reasonable. But whether or not it is reasonable, it is simply not general enough to provoke Geach's attack or to require the broad defense we have been discussing so far.<sup>28</sup>

Two passages in the *Hippias Major*, however, appear to commit Socrates to the stronger view that one simply cannot recognize any case of the fine or nobility without knowing its definition:

Just now someone got me badly stuck when I was finding fault with part of some speeches for being foul,

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26. Cited by Irwin, PMT, p. 294 n.4, by Richard Kraut, *Socrates and the State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 303 n. 82 (hereafter referred to as "SS"), and by C.C.W. Taylor, *Plato: "Protagoras"* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 212: "The thesis that it is impossible to any subject *x* and predicate *F*, to answer the question 'Is *x F*?' until one can answer the question 'What is *x*?' is familiar Socratic doctrine." The generality of this passage is correctly denied by Vlastos, SDK, p.26 n.65, who, however, believes (as does Kraut, SS, pp. 278-279) that *M.*71b, like *Rep.* 354b-c, is unrestricted. We have already discussed the passage of the *Meno* above, and we will soon examine that of the *Republic*.

27. Cited by Irwin, PMT, p. 294 n.4 and by Woodruff, *Plato: "Hippias Major,"* p. 140.

28. Some relevant remarks, though they are inspired by different passages and lead in a different direction, can be found in Santas, *Socrates*, pp. 123-124.

and praising other parts as fine. He questioned me this way, really insultingly: "Socrates, how do *you* know what sort of things (ὁποῖα) are fine and foul? Look, would you be able to say what the fine is?" (286c5-d2).

He asks if I'm not ashamed that I dare discuss fine activities when I've been so plainly refuted about the fine, and it's clear I don't even know at all what *that* is itself! "Look," he'll say, "how will you know whose speech -- or any other action -- is finely presented or not, when you are ignorant of the fine? And when you're in a state like that, do you think it's any better for you to live than die?" (304d5-e3; trans. Woodruff)

But in both cases Socrates claims that he had been discoursing on the subject and was then caught out. The emphasis is not on the recognition of individual instances of the fine. On the contrary, it seems to me, the questioner seems to ask whether Socrates can tell *in general* what is and isn't fine without knowing what the fine is. Alternatively, the questioner suggests that Socrates cannot defend his praise and fault-finding (ἐπαίνοῦντα...ψέγοντα) and cannot justify his discoursing (διαλέγεσθαι) on the subject without knowing the definition.<sup>29</sup> Either of those interpretations, which are compatible with each other, implies that the issue Socrates raises does not concern the mere recognition of individual cases of the

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29. This is also Santas' view of the first of these two passages, *Socrates*, p. 119.

fine.<sup>30</sup> The issue is not even one directly for Socrates himself, in any case. For his questioner, Socrates says (304c1-d3), attacks him at specific moments. Those are the moments when Socrates, instead of simply manifesting his ignorance and confusion (ἄπορία) to the wise, tries to act like them. That is, those are moments when Socrates professes to speak about the fine. But, then, as the dialogues clearly indicate, Socrates never tries to do this. It is only Hippias and others like him who speak about the fine and the other virtues in general terms, implying that they know what these are but betraying their ignorance when pressed. Socrates uses his imaginary interlocutor to put questions to Hippias, not to himself. And it is just Hippias' ignorance of his ignorance which, Socrates says through that interlocutor, makes his life not preferable to death.

Socrates does not accept a view open to Geach's charge in the *Lysis*, either. At 212a4-6, Socrates claims that he is so far from possessing (the virtue of) friendship that he does not even know how one person comes to be a friend of another. The question

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30. This is Woodruff's view, *Plato: "Hippias Major,"* p. 140, as well as Irwin's, *PMT*, p. 294 n. 4. For another objection to their effort to defend Socrates by attributing to him a distinction between knowledge and true belief, cf. Vlastos, *SDK*, pp. 22-26. Vlastos himself believes that the *Hippias Major* is a post-elenctic dialogue, and that it commits Plato (though not Socrates) to the unrestricted principle he also accepts at *M.* 71b3-4. For the reasons given above, I do not agree that Plato accepts this unrestricted principle in the *Meno*. I do agree with Vlastos' general resolution of the issue of "the Socratic fallacy"; he claims that it simply is not committed in the early, Socratic dialogues. But I am not convinced by the distinction between "philosophical" or "certain" and "elenctic" knowledge, which Vlastos wants to attribute to Socrates. I also think that Vlastos' discussion of the *Hippias* passage is subject to an independent problem. Vlastos attributes to Socrates the view that a life lived in ignorance of the definition of virtue is not worth living. But this view is much too strong, even for the author of the *Republic* (with whom, for Vlastos, the author of the *Hippias Major* is more nearly contemporary). Most people, according to Plato, are ignorant of the definition of the virtues, yet the life they lead in the *Republic* is not only preferable to death, but as good a life as a human being can live -- and Plato gives no indication that this is not, in more absolute terms, a good life.



of acquisition is still paramount.<sup>31</sup> And at 223b4-8, Socrates says that he and his interlocutors have appeared "ridiculous" since they consider themselves as friends of one another "but have not yet been able to discover what a friend is." This, too, is not a strong statement. It implies at most that if some people are, or take themselves to be, friends then they are more likely than others to know what friendship is -- or at least that they should be able to learn what it is once they apply themselves to that task. This is, incidentally, all that is implied in connection with temperance at *Chm.* 158c7-159a3, a passage in which Socrates explicitly mentions belief (δόξα) -- but without distinguishing it from knowledge (ἐπιστήμη). But to return to the *Lysis*, Socrates and his friends appear ridiculous for they have not yet (οὔπω) said what friendship is. Socrates may in fact be wrong in his optimistic conviction, though being a friend probably is at least a necessary condition for knowing what friendship is. But right or wrong, his view does not amount to the strong principle that we cannot know whether a relationship between two people is an instance of friendship without knowing what friendship is.

The final passage always cited in this connection is the end of *Republic* I, 354b-c. Here Socrates says that instead of pursuing the definition of justice, he wandered away into asking whether it is evil and ignorance or wisdom and virtue and whether justice is more beneficial than injustice, so that now he is totally confused. For

if I do not know what justice is, I shall hardly know whether it is a virtue or not and whether whoever possesses it is or is not happy. (354c1- 3)

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31. *Contra* Irwin, PMT, p. 294 n.4, who writes that this passage "suggests that we cannot be friends unless we know how one person becomes friend to another." The point, I would argue, is similar to that made at the opening of the *Meno*. Similarly, Irwin's view that *Lys.* 223b4-8 (discussed presently) "suggests that we cannot be friends unless ... we know what a friend is" does not have to be accepted.

One may be unwilling to appeal to this passage on the grounds that it represents Plato's, and not Socrates', views.<sup>32</sup> But even if we do, we shall see that the claim Socrates makes here is characteristically narrow. The features of justice with which Socrates is concerned have all, at least in this context, been highly disputed by Thrasymachus (significantly, they included the possibility that justice is wisdom (σοφία) and thus introduced the issue of its teachability).<sup>33</sup> In order to decide whether such features, once they have been denied in connection to justice by Thrasymachus, are actually true of it, we may well have to know first what its definition or essence is.

Socrates' insistence on the priority of definition is therefore very narrowly circumscribed. First, it seems to concern primarily the virtues and not every thing or every term, as Geach supposed. Second, it seems to apply only to specific issues, and not to all the features of virtue, as Geach's opponents actually conceded to him. Socrates seems to believe that we need to know the definition of a virtue in order to decide whether certain disputable features (either traditionally disputed, like teachability, or

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32. For a late date for *Rep. I* see Irwin, PMT, pp. 178-179, 183-184, 292 n.3. He still cites it as evidence for the view that "I must know what *x* is to know anything about *x*" (p. 294 n.4). Vlastos, who prefers an early date for *Rep. I*, claims that the closing passage of the book has been "tacked on" to the main text (SDK, p.26 n.65) because it contains the claim that Socrates does not know whether justice is a virtue. But this claim, he argues, contradicts the conclusion, previously agreed upon (351a5-6), that injustice is ignorance, hence its corollary that justice is knowledge and therefore that it is a virtue (350b5). But Socrates has engaged in a number of dialectical moves which Thrasymachus has conceded only with great reluctance (cf. 350c-d). There would therefore be, in my opinion, nothing wrong with Socrates being willing to reopen the whole question from the very beginning. This, of course, is exactly what the *Republic* proceeds to do. The "contradiction" signifies not that the end of Book I has been added to a text with which Plato remains in agreement but that Plato is not satisfied with the arguments he has given so far. A later date for the *Hippias Major* and the *Lysis* has also been proposed by Vlastos, "The Socratic Elenchus," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 1(1983), pp. 25-88, esp. 57-58.

33. Though, as we have seen (n.23 above), knowledge and teachings are closely connected both for Plato and for Aristotle, the *Dissoi Logoi* (VI.1) could raise the question whether wisdom (σοφία) as well as *aretê* is teachable.

disputed on particular occasions, like its benefits in the case of Thrasymachus) are or are not true of it.<sup>34</sup> We also need to know it in order to decide whether particularly disputable courses of action do or do not fall under it. And we need to know it in order to discourse generally about it, that is, in order to present ourselves, as Hippias does, in the guise of experts in its regard. None of this amounts to a fallacy and none of it requires a broad methodological response.

In fact, Socrates often claims to have a number of views about some of the features of virtue as well as about some of its instances. He claims, for example, that noble (καλά) things are beneficial (ὠφέλιμα) and good (ἀγαθά) and that courage is noble (La. 192c5-6, HMa. 296cd, 297c, M. 77b6-7). Actually, as we now know, he relies heavily on these and other such views in practicing the elenchus; without them many of his arguments against proposed definitions could never proceed. We might of course want to say that he only has true belief and not knowledge about them. But since we are no longer bothered by Geach's charge, why should we? Why not say instead that Socrates claims to know a number of noncontroversial features of the virtues?<sup>35</sup> Socrates can also believe that he is able to distinguish some virtuous actions from others that are vicious. He can still claim, consistently with the above and reasonably in any case, that he is unable to answer controversial questions about the virtues themselves or about their instances without

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34. Richard Kraut has objected that this account makes knowledge depend on what is and is not actually disputed. I know a proposition, he claims, "if everyone agrees with me. But if someone disagrees, that makes my claim controversial, and I no longer know it." I respond that Socrates is primarily concerned with features of virtue which have been in fact traditionally disputed. He gives no indication that he is willing to take seriously any doubt raised by anyone on any grounds. If someone, like Thrasymachus, wants to dispute a feature which has not in fact been in dispute, then the burden of making the claim at least *prima facie* plausible is his. If the case is strong, and if the disputed feature turns out to depend on the essence of virtue, then it may in fact follow that to answer the challenge we must offer an account of what virtue is.

35. None of the transitions alluded to in the texts above is supported by argument, which strongly suggests that they all have intuitive appeal. A similar move is made at G. 468d-569b; cf. Vlastos, "Happiness and Virtue in Socrates' Moral Theory," p. 203 n.14.

knowing their definitions. and he can very well expect anyone who offers answers to such questions to be able to offer, and to defend, the appropriate account.

In short, Socrates' insistence on the priority of definition occurs within a carefully delineated context, not only in the *Meno*, but also in many other Platonic dialogues. It is indeed necessary to know what virtue is in order to know whether it has features which are as much in dispute as the nature of virtue itself and which are therefore parts of that nature. But knowledge of the definition is not prior to knowledge of all features or instances of virtue. On the contrary, as the practice of the dialogues shows, the search for definition depends on presupposing such knowledge. This is knowledge which no one in the dialogues disputes.

No one, that is, except Thrasymachus. Even Callicles is willing to concede that real, as opposed to conventional, justice is a virtue (G. 488b8-489c7). But Thrasymachus boldly refuses to agree that justice is a virtue at *Rep.* I, 348c ff. -- a position which eventually prompts Socrates' peculiar statement at the end of Book I. In fact, and not unexpectedly, Socrates' response to Thrasymachus, after he has made sure that Thrasymachus means what he says, is that it is very hard to know how to reply to such a view (348e5-6). He goes on to argue in a roundabout way for the conclusion that, whether justice is or is not a virtue, it is still more beneficial than injustice. For it is just by denying this view that Thrasymachus was led to his counterintuitive position in the first place. But as the end of *Rep.* I suggests, Socrates is not totally pleased with his efforts.

To return to where we started, Plato's example involving the knowledge of Meno, like all his views on the priority of definition, is straightforward and uncontroversial. It says that if I have no idea who Meno is, I can also have no idea of the features which depend on who he is. The example transfers to virtue in that it shows that if I do not know what virtue is I cannot know whether or not it can be taught -- a feature which I characterized as disputable in the same way as the definition of virtue is disputable and which is directly connected with virtue's nature.

My conclusion then is that Socrates' belief in the priority of definition is much less radical than we have often tended to

suppose. It depends neither on a general theory of meaning nor on an epistemological view about the grounding of belief in knowledge. It does not even depend on a general theory of definition. Aristotle (*Met. M* 4, 1078b23-25), who also limits Socrates' interest to the virtues,<sup>36</sup> suggests that Socrates was motivated to look for definitions because definition is prior to syllogistic argument. He may well have been right about the latter point, but that was not, I think Socrates' reason for his search, though it was perfectly consistent with it. Though Plato's Socratic dialogues contain crucial logical, semantical, epistemological, and metaphysical ideas, and though such ideas are among the greatest and most lasting contributions to our philosophical heritage, these dialogues are not, as such, logical, semantical, epistemological, or metaphysical treatises. Socrates did not consider definition in general as an end in itself. Nor did he think that it was the necessary beginning of all knowledge whatever. To that extent, at least, the first charge of intellectualism against him fails. But he certainly did consider definition essential and he pursued it relentlessly as a means for answering a question he did in fact see as an end in itself, the only one he really cared about, the question of the nature and the content of the good life, of *eudaimonia*.

## II

Did Socrates succeed in answering his question? Could he, with the means he put at his disposal? We have seen that he did not believe that knowledge of virtue is necessary for recognizing every case of virtuous action or even for acting virtuously on occasion. But acting virtuously on occasion is not the same as being virtuous, as Aristotle also clearly pointed out (*EN* II.3, 1105a26-b12); this does seem to involve knowledge as well as constancy and stability of motivation. But if knowledge of the nature of virtue is at least necessary as well as sufficient for the good life, and yet Socrates never acquired that knowledge, was his life a failure? And if Socrates was wrong, and knowledge of virtue must be supplemented by good upbringing and by the independent training of character in order to secure virtue and happiness, was his teaching a mistake? In either case, his moral

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36. Contrast Kraut, *SS*, p. 247 n.7.

intellectualism appears to condemn him: either a failed person, or a failed teacher, or perhaps both. Is this the Socrates we have to live with?

These are immensely complicated questions. They presuppose answers to other equally complicated questions and give rise to still further questions which we cannot hope to answer at once, or perhaps ever. What follows, then, is in more than one sense of that term, only the slightest beginning. The question on which I will concentrate concerns Socrates as a teacher of *aretê*. This is the word I have translated as "virtue" so far, but which, it is well known, covers a much broader range than its morally-oriented conventional English equivalent. Generally speaking, I take *aretê* to concern the capacity for achieving a justifiably high reputation among one's peers and the achieved reputation as well, as *success* in a very broad sense.<sup>37</sup> Our question then becomes whether this was something of which Socrates was a successful teacher.

The answer to this question emerges, in my opinion, quite clearly in Plato's earlier dialogues. Within the world of these dialogues Socrates is not depicted as a good teacher of *aretê*, especially by his own standards. The most crucial reason seems to be that Socrates is convinced that in order to be a teacher of anything, one must first know the subject oneself. This is, of course, the point with which the *Meno* (the first half of which is thoroughly Socratic) begins; it is also made explicitly at *Alc.* I 111a11-12. Even to be an advisor on how something is to be acquired, even to point out its proper teachers, Socrates claims, one must know what the subject in question is (in the context from which this point is taken, *La.* 190b7-c2, the subject is *aretê* itself). Yet

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37. I have provided some evidence for this account, which, with suitable substitutions for "peers," applies to animals and even to inanimate objects (*Iliad* XXIII. 267, 374; *Thuc.* I. 2. 4; *Herod.* III. 106.2) in "Meno's Paradox and Socrates as a Teacher," pp. 2-5. Amélie Rorty points out that reputation in this context depends on having lived a good life, and that it is the capacity for this latter that is of essence to *aretê*. I think that the notion of success does bring in the idea of the good life, without the more strictly moral connotations introduced by the term "good." The question "Does success ensure happiness?" is as plausible in English as the parallel question about *aretê* and *eudaimonia* was in Greek.

Socrates is the first to admit, and steadfastly to insist, that he does not know what *aretê* or any of its parts (justice, temperance, and the other virtues) is.<sup>38</sup> His view that *aretê* is knowledge of good and evil, if he in fact holds it (*Ch.* 135a3-8, *La.* 199c4-e9), is, in my opinion, not sufficient to count as a definition because without an explicit account of what constitutes good and evil

38. I am inclined to take Socrates' profession of ignorance with regard to the "What is x?" question quite seriously, at least when the subject in question is *aretê* (*Eu.* 5a3-c5, 6d9-36, 11b11-5, d2-e5, 14b8-c5, 15c11-a4; *Ch.* 165b5-c1, 166c77-d6, 175c2-176b4; *La.* 185c4-186c5, 199e11-12, 200e2-201b5; *Pr.* 361c3-6; *HMa.* 286c3-e4, 304d4-e3; *Lys.* 212a4-7, 223b4-8; *M.* 71a5-7, 80c8-d1, 100b4-6; *G.* 506 a3-5, 509a4-6; *Rep.* I, 337d3-4, 354c1-3; cf. Aristotle, *SE*, 186b6-8). Many of these passages, some of which we have already discussed, are cited by Kraut, SS, p. 247 n.7. The moral Kraut draws from them, however, is that "Socrates cannot answer his 'What is x?' question even when x is not a virtue." I don't think I accept this. First, because of the general reasons offered in the first part of this essay. Second, because the implication in these passages that more than virtue is at issue is not at all easy to find. Third, because Socrates sometimes suggests that he does in fact have answers for his "what is x?" question when *aretê* is not the subject: *La.* 192a1-b4, *Eu.* 765-d5, *M.* 72a6-c5, 75b8-76a7. It is, of course, a further question whether the definitions given or implied in these passages are ultimately acceptable; cf. Irwin, PMT, pp. 44-46. For reasons stated earlier, I do not accept Irwin's view that Socrates lacks knowledge, but possesses true beliefs about the virtues. In any case, I don't think Irwin and I would disagree on the particular case of the answer to the "What is x?" question: we would agree that Socrates lacks it. For if he possessed it, then on Irwin's view, Socrates' true beliefs about *aretê* would thereby become knowledge -- which, as Irwin correctly insists, Socrates lacks.

Gregory Vlastos' recent position, in SDK, is more difficult to come to terms with. His distinction between deductive, philosophical, or certain knowledge and knowledge arrived at through the elenchus, and always subject to revision, accounts for more of Plato's texts than Irwin's. For Socrates, as Vlastos points out, claims to have knowledge more often than we suppose. On the other hand, Vlastos' distinction (already prefigured, though not developed in PS pp. 9-12) is not easy to accept. Vlastos' claim that Socrates contrasts elenctic knowledge with a higher sort of philosophical knowledge is problematic: we need more evidence than we are given in order to agree that such a stronger conception of knowledge already existed and could provide a sensible term for the contrast. Vlastos interestingly appeals to Parmenides' presentation of his position through "hierophantic trappings" which suggest to him a commitment to certainty (p. 17). Still, in B7 Parmenides characterizes his view, and asks that it be rationally evaluated as a *poluderis elenchos*; the occurrence of this term raises serious questions about the status of Parmenides' argument and, in fact, about the sense of the word itself. Another factor which needs to be carefully considered is whether, as Vlastos assumes, different *methods* for reaching knowledge (the tentative elenchus as opposed to a more systematic deductive approach, assuming the concept had application before Plato) necessarily produce different *kinds* of knowledge.

such knowledge cannot possibly be a guide to, much less a guarantor of, goodness and *eudaimonia*. Knowledge of good and evil cannot in itself constitute a definition of virtue unless one can say independently what these are (*La.* 190c6; cf. Xenophon, *Mem.* IV. vi.1).

But there are other reasons as well for Socrates' failure as a teacher. In his earlier dialogues, Plato raises a number of problems for those who profess, or are claimed by others to be able, to teach what *aretê* is. One such argument is that the great Athenian statesmen (the most successful people of their time) have not even been able to accomplish the least one would expect of such teachers; that is, to make their own children good (*Pr.* 319d7-320b3, *M.* 92e1-94e2: cf. *Alc.* I, 118c-119e).<sup>39</sup> In the *Gorgias*, more radically and perhaps more as Plato's own spokesman, Socrates is made to deny that the great statesmen even possessed *aretê* themselves since, he argues, they seem to have left the citizens actually worse than they found them when they came to power. Pericles, for example, is disqualified by a strangely poignant argument: how could he be considered to have tended his people well if toward the end of his rule he was brought to trial for theft and almost sentenced to death? (*G.* 515e10-516a3; 515c4-517a6 is all relevant to this issue.)

In addition, the sophists are disqualified as teachers of *aretê* for at least two reasons. First, through the complicated general arguments of which the *Protagoras*, the *Euthydemus*, the

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39. The argument of the *Meno* is particularly ironic. Recall that in answering Meno's opening question regarding the acquisition of *aretê*, Socrates replies that, in possible contrast to Thessaly, Athens is suffering from an apparent drought of wisdom. Any Athenian to whom Meno might put his question, Socrates continues, would reply that he is ignorant not only of whether or not virtue can be taught but also of its very nature (*M.* 71a1-7). Yet when Anytus, who is of course one of the Athenians on behalf of whom Socrates had earlier spoken, enters the discussion he confidently asserts that any good (καλὸς καγαθός) citizen would know how to make Meno, or anyone else, a better person. This, of course, would qualify any Athenian as a teacher of *aretê* and therefore as knowing what its nature is (*M.* 92e3-6). Socrates is the only one, it seems, who lacks the knowledge in question.



*Hippias Major*, and the *Gorgias* consist.<sup>40</sup> Secondly, because, as the *Meno* claims, they cannot even agree with one another about whether *aretê* can or cannot be taught, a point which also applies to the notables discussed in the previous paragraph (*M.* 95b9-c8; cf. *Alc.* I, 111b3-4).<sup>41</sup> Finally, the *Meno* dismisses the poets as teachers of *aretê* because, as a quick examination of Theognis is supposed to show, their views on *aretê* are not even internally consistent (*M.* 95c9-96a5), and the *Ion* denies that they possess any knowledge of their subject-matter.

But the most serious argument against the professors of *aretê* occurs, as I have argued in detail elsewhere,<sup>42</sup> in the opening pages of the *Protagoras* (313a1-314c2). Socrates here warns Hippocrates, who is passionately eager to become Protagoras' student, of the grave dangers involved in approaching the sophist or anyone else who professes to teach, especially though not necessarily for a fee, what *aretê* is. Unlike food for the body, the appropriateness of which we can check with an expert before we consume it, learning, which is food for the soul, has to be carried away directly within the soul itself. There is no time, as it were, to consult an expert about its possible harms and benefits between obtaining it and consuming it. In addition, there seem to be no acknowledged experts in the field in any case. We must therefore ourselves know beforehand whether what the professor or *aretê* offers is or is not good for the soul. And to know this is to know how a soul is made better or worse. But to know this, as is argued explicitly in the *Laches* (189d4-190c6), is just to know in what the soul's goodness consists. And that is nothing other than *aretê*. We should therefore

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40. Useful remarks on Plato's attitude toward the sophists as teachers of *aretê* can be found in C. J. Rowe, "Plato on the Sophists as Teachers of Virtue," *History of Political Thought*, 4 (1983), pp. 409-427. My only reservation about this interesting article is that it tends to assimilate too quickly the attitude toward the sophists expressed in Plato's early works with the much more complicated, metaphysically loaded account offered in the late *Sophist*.

41. According to Xenophon, *Mem.* I.i.13 f., Socrates was also suspicious of natural philosophers because they were in such violent disagreement with one another about the most fundamental issues which concerned them.

42. Cf. "Meno's Paradox and Socrates as a Teacher," pp. 12-14.

approach professors of *aretê* in order to learn from them without fear only if we already know what they profess to teach. Teachers of *aretê* are simply useless.

There may seem to be two problems with this account. First, it could be argued that Socrates was capable of determining whether Protagoras, say, or Hippias was a proper teacher of *aretê* without being such an expert himself. This is true. But all it shows is that you do not need to be an expert in order to disqualify such a professor. But what about determining that someone does know, and can teach, what *aretê* is? This generates the second apparent problem for my view. For, one might argue, if experts on *aretê* existed, they could approach its professors first, and if they determined that their teachings were worthwhile, they could encourage us to approach them. But, first, no such experts on *aretê* seem to exist. Secondly and more importantly, it would follow by our previous argument that if they existed they themselves would be at least as good teachers of *aretê* as the professors they examined. In that case, we could bypass the teachers altogether and attach ourselves to the experts. But how, in that case, would we be able to recognize the experts? Wouldn't our earlier problem apply to them as well? In a community with no clear criteria for distinguishing experts from charlatans, it is not easy to see how an expert can be recognized by someone who does not already possess knowledge of the subject in question.

The notion of an expert raises very difficult problems for the interpretation of Plato. "The expert in a particular craft," Terence Irwin writes, "offers authoritative advice, supported by a rational account; and Socrates argues that we should seek someone equally authoritative in morals" (*PMT*, p.71). I think it is true that Socrates often wishes that virtue were like a craft, of which there could be recognizable experts. I am not so sure, however, that Socrates took the "craft analogy" as seriously as Irwin claims. His attitude, in my opinion, is more equivocal.

Irwin considers that it is essential to a craft that it have a clear, rational, teachable method (*PMT*, p.34), that the method can be explained to non-experts (*PMT*, p.23), and that disputes within a craft can always be decided by reference to the quality of its end-products (*PMT*, p.24). Now it is clear, of course, that the crafts

are teachable. But it is not so clear that their method is "rational" if by that we mean that their procedure can be explained to outsiders. Perhaps a craftsman can explain why he acts in a particular way at a particular time. But the stronger claim, which Irwin claims to find at *Ap.* 22d3-4 (*PMT*, p.73), seems to me neither true nor in the text. All that Socrates says in the *Apology* is that, relative to their work, the craftsmen "knew things I didn't and were to that extent wiser than I was." He implies that the craftsmen know what they are doing, but not that they can explain what they are doing to others. And if even this weak implication is missing, so is the much stronger implication that the practice of a craft can be taught on the basis solely of rational and intellectual factors. Socrates, himself a statuary and a statuary's son (D.L. V.I. 18), knew perfectly well that in ancient Athens the crafts were most often transmitted along with their "secrets within the family from generation to generation."<sup>43</sup> The overwhelming evidence is that fathers trained their sons and even that "training probably began at an earlier age than in modern times."<sup>44</sup> Habituation no less than "rational method" is essential for the practice if not also for the appreciation of a craft. And disputes, we should recall, were not so easily settled: the famous case of the constant competitiveness between Zeuxis and Parrhasius is only one of many, and the invective heaped by the author of *On*

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43. Alison Burford, *Craftsmen in Greek and Roman Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972). p. 82.

44. Burford, *Craftsmen in Greek and Roman Society*, p. 89. Burford also writes: "Craftsmen ... had to undergo long and thorough training. Constant application was required of a man if he was to become fully acquainted with his craft. Once he had learnt it, he must continue to exercise his skill, otherwise it would decay and die on him" (p. 69). Pliny, for example, writes that Apelles drew every day in order to maintain his ability in top form (*NH*, 35, 84). Such statements invite both contrast and comparison with Aristotle's view that *aretê* is almost impossible to lose since it is by nature such as to be constantly manifested in action (*EN*. III. 5, 1114b30-1115a4; IV. 10, 1152a28-33). One could well ask whether Apelles had to force himself to draw or whether, like the virtuous agent who finds pleasure in right action, he preferred it to other activities. Cf. also Maurice Pope, *The Ancient Greeks: How They Lived and Worked* (Newton: David and Charles, 1976), p. 73.

*Ancient Medicine* on conceptions of medicine differing from his own, another.<sup>45</sup>

Still, there is no question about the fact that Socrates often brings the crafts into his discussion of *aretê* and that he sometimes claims that an expert on the subject, "if there is an expert," would be of great help to us in learning to be good (*Cr.* 47c8-48c10). But, implicit in all of Plato's early dialogues and particularly important in the passage of the *Protagoras* we have already discussed, there is a very serious problem concerning the expert of *aretê*. This is a problem we have already mentioned; how are we to recognize an expert even if one actually does exist? The issue, in my opinion, is very serious and it has deep implications for Socrates' views on moral character and on the nature of the ability to live well.

In *Socrates and the State*, Richard Kraut argues that, contrary to what most people have thought, Socrates was not an absolute opponent of Athenian democracy. Kraut agrees that Socrates believed that "if there ever are moral experts, then they alone should have political power; they should give commands to the other citizens, and these commands should be obeyed" (p.233). But since Socrates also believed that no moral expert (himself included) existed, he was willing to accept the rule of the many as the best available alternative.

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45. On *Ancient Medicine* I. 13-19, and cf. the commentary of A. J. Festugiere, in Hippocrate: *L'Antienne Médecine* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1948; repr. 1979). On the dispute between Zeuxis and Parrhasius, cf. Pliny, *NH*, 35, 61; on the competition between Apelles and Protogenes, *NH*, 35, 79; a related story occurs in *NH*, 36, 61. Richard Kraut has objected that I hold the implausible view that "no craft need be rationally explainable to any outsider." The fact is that I do not hold that view. Of course crafts can be taught and learned. But this, as I argue, requires time, training, and habituation. All I argue is that a craft cannot be learned simply by intellectual methods. In addition, I do not want to deny that particular actions within a craft can be explained to outsiders. Pheidias could well explain why a specific part of the statue of Pallas Athena needed to be made of ivory (though not, perhaps, why he had requested as much as he had). This would not be very different from what, for example, Socrates himself does in the *Crto* when he argues, to his satisfaction, that he should not attempt to escape from prison.

Kraut's view of the moral expert is not too far removed from that of Irwin, though it is more authoritarian. It gives, in fact, relatively little weight to the role of argument and persuasion in Socrates' view of the nature of the expert of *aretê* and of the process of recognizing him. Kraut seems to argue that once moral experts are somehow recognized, then Socrates is perfectly willing to give them the power to issue commands to the rest of the citizens. These commands will then be obeyed to a great extent just because they are the commands of these acknowledged experts.

This voluntaristic approach to moral expertise, however, immediately seems to conflict with the central Socratic idea that "the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being" (*Ap.* 38a5-6). Kraut is aware of the conflict, but he thinks it is only apparent. The idea of examination, he argues, applies only to understanding and not to obeying the expert's commands:

If you acquire your beliefs from someone you recognize as a moral expert, then you can be fairly sure that nothing you believe is false. But that still leaves a good deal of work for you to do. Just accepting what someone says doesn't give you much understanding of what he says. (SS, p.241)

But can we plausibly attribute to Socrates, in the context of the conduct of life, this sort of distinction between accepting someone's view and understanding it? The elenchus depends essentially on the idea that you must neither offer nor receive a view as your own unless it is truly a view of your own -- unless, that is, you are sure you accept it.<sup>46</sup> But to be sure that you accept a view you must first understand it, or at least think that you do so. For to accept a view as your own is to believe that it does not conflict with other views of your own. To accept a view you must first, both logically and temporally, understand it.

In fairness to Kraut, we should point out that he applies the distinction between accepting and understanding a view to the conduct of life only on the assumption that moral experts exist.

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46. I take this to be a legitimate extension of the requirement on the elenchus which Gregory Vlastos has termed the "say what you believe" condition; cf. his "The Socratic Elenchus," p. 35.

This is to assume that the conduct of life does bear some deep similarities to the practice of the crafts. In the crafts, both outsiders and apprentices accept the master's word just because it is issued by the master. Perhaps a particular master could explain a particular view then and there, but doesn't; perhaps we could only understand it after we became fairly proficient in the craft ourselves. And in either case, provided an expert has been determined to exist, the distinction between accepting and understanding a view can be clearly drawn.

Yet the problem with moral experts does not concern only their existence but also, as we have seen, their recognition. Even if disagreements in the crafts are more common than Irwin suggests, we can still accept his view that we have a reasonably good idea about which craftsmen are better than which and we also know that learning a craft takes time and practice. But even if we agree that moral experts do exist, it still would not be clear that we could recognize them independently of the fact that their arguments in favor of these views, their reasons for living as they did, were *convincing*. And because of this problem the distinction between understanding and obeying appears, once again, to collapse. Kraut believes that moral experts must not only give commands: they must also try to "get the others to understand" their reasons for issuing them (SS, p.248). But moral experts, so far as I can tell, are simply those people who can convincingly explain why we should act in one way rather than in another.

Consider, for example, the argument in the *Euthyphro* where Socrates refuses to accept as a definition of the pious its specification as what all the gods love. His reason is that this is not consistent with the fact that the gods love the pious because it is pious since it construes as the pious whatever it is that the gods happen to love (9e1-11b1). The clear implication is that the gods (moral experts, if anyone is a moral expert) love the pious for a reason, and that this reason explains not only why the pious is pious but also why (as Euthyphro believes) they command us to do it. But this reason, and not the gods' love, is then what constitutes piety itself. This extreme objectivism bypasses the experts altogether. The only factor in the situation that matters is their reason for wanting us to act in some ways and not in others.

And this reason can be convincing, and therefore worthy of obedience, only if we understand what it is and find it rationally acceptable.<sup>47</sup>

Kraut's view, in my opinion, leans toward voluntarism more than Socrates would be willing to allow. At least, Kraut's view is voluntarist for the intermediate stages of moral development, within which in general he distinguishes four. Kraut believes that Socrates has reached a point in his moral development at which he can discern a moral expert without being one himself. In support of his view, he cites, for example, *Eu.* 6e3-6, which says that if I know what piety is then I can use it as a standard to decide whether anything is or is not pious. Kraut writes:

It would be natural for Socrates to assume that anyone who possesses such a standard ought to be in a position of authority. For why should decisions be made by majority rule, when someone already knows what the outcome of such decisions should be? (SS, p.233)

The situation, however, is in my view considerably more complicated and equivocal. Socrates is here asking Euthyphro, with obvious emphasis on the word, to *teach* (διδάσκειν) him what the standard of piety, which he claims to know, is (6e3; cf. 5a3-4, c4-5, 15e5-7). He wants to learn what that standard is so that *he*, Socrates, can discriminate correctly between pious and impious courses of action. He never says or implies that if Euthyphro knows the definition of piety then, as Kraut's view suggests, Euthyphro should make decisions on Socrates' behalf. Ironically presupposing that Euthyphro is an expert,

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47. Cf. S. Marc Cohen, "Socrates on the Definition of Piety: *Euthyphro* 10A-11B" in Vlastos, *Socrates*, pp. 158-175, esp. p. 175: "If a moral concept M is such that there is an authority whose judgement whether or not something falls under M is decisive and is rationally grounded, then 'M' cannot be defined in terms of that authority's judgement." Cohen's view is stronger than what we need to believe in order to disagree with Kraut. Even if a virtue is not to be defined as what a moral expert commands, our recognition of someone as an expert depends on his being able to *persuade* us that his judgement is rational. On Socrates' antivoluntarism, cf. Santas, *Socrates*, p. 56. A discussion of voluntarism and objectivism, tracing the debate back to the *Euthyphro*, can be found in William Mann, "Modality, Morality, and God," unpub - lished manuscript, 1986.

Socrates presents himself, equally ironically, as his student. But the point he makes is not itself ironical.

This is the point that one attaches oneself to experts in order to gain understanding from them, and that only the acquisition of understanding can convince us that our putative expert was also an expert in fact -- which is exactly what Euthyphro is not. Socrates can reach understanding only through an examination, an elenchus, of Euthyphro. His elenchus fails to yield a definition and thus succeeds in leading him to understanding as little as it succeeds in undermining Euthyphro's claim to possessing it -- that is, not at all.<sup>48</sup> But if his elenchus had actually led to a definition of piety which was, so far as anyone could tell, immune to dialectical attack, then Socrates, in grasping that definition (no easy task itself), would have become himself an expert on piety. Perhaps a city, as Kraut correctly notes, cannot function without commands accepted just because they are issued by those with authority. But what I am arguing is that Plato's Socrates simply does not seem concerned with the general problem of the nature of political community. The furthest he goes in that direction essentially involves his own relationship to the state insofar as that relationship is relevant to his living well. This, of course, is the problem of the *Crito*.

What seems to follow from this is not that moral experts, if they exist, should issue commands to the rest of us, as Kraut thinks<sup>49</sup>. What follows is that such experts would devote all their efforts to imparting their understanding to the rest of us, thus making us experts too, and securing their recognition. This, in my opinion, is one of the most crucial, interesting, and paradoxical consequences of Socrates' view on moral education: only one good human being can recognize another.

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48. For his own reasons, to which we shall allude below, Socrates never stops pretending to believe that Euthyphro knows what piety is; cf. *Eu.* 15d5-e2.

49. Kraut, SS, p. 233, also appeals to *La.* 184e8-9 as evidence for his views. But Socrates' example of an expert here is a teacher of gymnastics, whom there may be good reason to obey even if the motivation for his commands are not obvious. In any case, this linguistic point I am about to make, if acceptable, provides further evidence against him.



In general, I think that the whole notion of obedience and submission, which becomes central to the educational schemes of both Plato and Aristotle, is deeply unimportant to Socrates. In particular, I don't think it plays a serious role in the passage on which Kraut depends crucially for his view. This is the famous sentence of the *Apology* (29b6- 6):

To do an injustice and disobey a superior, whether divine or human: that, I know, is bad and shameful.

Kraut writes:

Socrates talks about obedience to god and to man in the same breath: the absolute submission owed to an immortal is also owed to a human superior. (SS, p.234)<sup>50</sup>

Two points are important here. First, we should take issue with Kraut's idea of "the absolute submission owed to an immortal." To be sure, Socrates never disobeyed his *daimonion*, which was, I think, as much of a mystery to him as it is to us. But just a few pages earlier in the same speech, he tells the jurors that when he received Apollo's oracle that he was the wisest of the Athenians he was very puzzled. He claims to have known that the god couldn't have lied, but, nevertheless, he decided he had to put the oracle to the test (ἐλέγξων, 21c1) in order to be able to say, "This man here is wiser than I am, though you claimed I was the one" (21c2-3). It is only after his many conversations with the politicians, the poets, and the artisans (20c6-23a) that Socrates came to see that the god might have been right to proclaim him wise on the grounds that he, at least, was aware of his ignorance (23a5-14). There is no question that Socrates feels he owed the god "absolute submission"; on the contrary, he *tests* the oracle's wisdom as rigorously as he tests the wisdom of those by means of whom he tests the oracle itself.

But doesn't Socrates claim throughout the *Apology* that the god has "ordered" him to practice philosophy and that to stop doing so would be to "disobey" the oracle (28d6-19a1, 30a5, 33c4-7, 37e5-38)? This is true, but it is crucial to remember that Socrates interprets the oracle as an "order" to do philosophy only after, as

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50. Cf. Richard Kraut, "Plato's *Apology* and *Crito*: Two Recent Studies." *Ethics*, 91 (1981), pp. 651-664, esp. p. 549.

we just put it, he tests it in order to determine whether or not it is true. And, I think, it is Socrates' conviction that the god was right when he said that he was the wisest of the Athenians that provides the grounds for his practicing the elenchus. The god after all, never issued a direct command to Socrates. Socrates' effort to prove the oracle wrong turned out to be the practice of philosophy -- and, for all that the elenchus can show, Socrates may still run into someone who knows something "good and noble" (21d4), and thus show the oracle to be wrong after all. But, in the meantime, he has been convinced that this is the "best" post for him to have (28d7, 10; 30a7-b2). And at 38a1-8 he claims explicitly, after again alluding to the god's command, that the elenchus, which is the daily concern with *aretê*, is "the greatest human good." There is, in my opinion, not a trace of voluntarism in Socrates' "obedience" to the god; on the contrary, he only does, as he always did, what he thinks is, on independent grounds, the best thing.

This brings us to a second point in connection with *Ap.* 29b6-7. The word Kraut translates here as "disobey" is ἀπειθεῖν, and it is, of course, clear that "obey" and "disobey" are common enough senses of the verbs πείθεσθαι and ἀπειθεῖν.<sup>51</sup> For example, the most plausible translation of πείσομαι at 29d3, just a few lines below, may be "obey."<sup>52</sup> But the etymological connection between πείθω and its cognates and the notion of persuasion is never, I think, far from the surface in the uses of these terms. In any case, immediately after 29b6-7, there occurs an important passage. Socrates here considers the possibility that the court might refuse to believe Anytus (ἀπιστήσαντες)<sup>53</sup> and set him free. He goes on to imagine that, not having been *convinced* (οὐ περσόμεθα) by Anytus' call for the death penalty, they will spare him on condition that he no longer engage in philosophy -- something which, he says, he would refuse to do. It is clear, I think, that the Greek word here

51. Cf. *LSJ*, s.v. ἀπειθέω; s.v. πείθω, l.2.

52. Cf. Kraut, "Plato's *Apology* and *Crito*," pp. 658-659, where he is disputing the translation of the verb as "be persuaded by" by A. D. Woozley, *Law and Obedience: The Argument of Plato's Crito* (London, Duckworth, 1979), pp. 44-46.

53. Cf. *LSJ*, s.v. ἀπιστεύω, l.2.

must be translated as I have given it, and not as "obey": the court is referring to Anytus' arguments and to their effects upon it. There can be no question of the court *obeying* one of the parties involved in the dispute.

What this suggests is that Socrates envisages that the same relationship holds between himself and whoever is better than he is, god or human, between Anytus and the jury, and perhaps between himself and the jury as well. The central idea is that at 29b6-7 Socrates is saying that it would be bad and shameful to fail to be convinced or persuaded by either a human or by a divine moral expert. The question of submission, I think, is not raised. Socrates characteristically claims that the expert is just whoever has the knowledge necessary to convince us that a course of action is right and wrong. His terminology may suggest that a convincing argument may be recognized but not followed. But this, in my opinion, is a rhetorical maneuver intended to introduce the terms *κακόν* and *αἰσχρόν*. Given his view that knowledge is sufficient for virtue, Socrates cannot believe that we can act against our conviction that a certain action is or is not to be performed.<sup>54</sup>

Experts, then, cannot be recognized unless you are convinced by their arguments. But what does such conviction involve? It involves accepting the conclusions of these arguments as well as the methods by which the arguments reach their directions for how to act. And what, in turn, is this? Is it not a way of saying that one has become, at least to that extent, a moral expert, a virtuous

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54. This last is the important point. Even if we insist on translating ἀπειθεῖν as "to disobey," Socrates is not making a substantive point. Once you have recognized that someone is better than you are, you have become convinced by that person's views. And, on Socratic grounds, it is impossible to fail to act on those views.

Notice also the statement at *Ap.* 28d6-29a1, where Socrates speaks of obeying his commanders, human and divine. What he says is that you must pursue any course of action which you chose "having considered it the best" or which was ordered by your commander. The first alternative clearly introduces the idea of judging the rightness of an action for oneself. The latter, I think, depends on Socrates' obeying his commanders in a particular case having already agreed, on rational grounds, to obey them in general, as Richard Kraut himself demonstrates in *Socrates and the State*.

agent, oneself? Isn't it to say that only one virtuous person can recognize another?

But if this is the case, and if a moral expert must possess knowledge of the definition of virtue (which is more than knowledge of a few formulae concerning it),<sup>55</sup> how can one become a moral agent? How can one learn to be good? The elenchus could succeed in showing that someone did in fact know what virtue is only if the questioner arrived at that knowledge himself during the questioning. Socrates' repeated willingness to continue his discussions indefinitely suggests just this: the elenchus can succeed positively only if both parties reach the relevant understanding together.<sup>56</sup> The recognition of a moral expert, that is, a virtuous agent, through the elenchus can ultimately only be mutual. It always involves one of the participants becoming non-coercively convinced of the views, and therefore of the ways, of the other.<sup>57</sup>

The elenchus, then, works only through persuasion. But this seems to compound against Socrates the charges of moral intellectualism with which we began. Socrates seems to believe that only knowledge is relevant to right action. He also appears to hold that such knowledge can only be reached by means of the elenchus, by means, that is, of strictly intellectual argument. Our character and the other affective features of our personality are irrelevant to such argument. This may now be put together with the view, plausibly attributed to Socrates, that knowledge is not only sufficient but also necessary for virtue (*Ap.* 29d2-30a1).<sup>58</sup>

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55. Kraut, SS, pp. 279-285, shows the complexity of the knowledge involved in knowing the definition of the virtues.

56. Cf., for example, *Eu.* 15e3-4, *Ch.* 176a6ff., *La.* 210b6-c5, *Lys.* 223a1- b3, *Pr.* 361e5-6.

57. This, though I am not sure, may be the point of *Ap.* 26a1-4. Socrates here claims that if Meletus thought that Socrates was harming the young involuntarily, he should "have taken him aside, taught, and put sense in him"; for, he continues, "it is clear that once I have learned (what is good), I shall stop doing what I have only been doing involuntarily."

58. Cf. Irwin, PMT, p. 90. I am not sure that *Lys.* 212a1-7, 223b4-8, which Irwin cites in this connection, actually support this view, as our earlier discussion may indicate. *La.* 193d11-e6 is, in my opinion, a more likely candidate.

What appears to follow is that knowledge and virtue go hand in hand, that Socrates does not have the relevant knowledge, and that he assumes he can determine what virtue is and can therefore act well by paying attention only to our intellect. But this is a doomed project. If virtue is only a matter of learning, strictly speaking, then it never has been learned. And neither can it ever be learned.

The ancient charges against Socrates as a moral educator have been recently revived.<sup>59</sup> Plato and Aristotle seem to have accused him with caring only for the intellect and not also for the character, habits, and dispositions of his students. Aristophanes may have claimed against him that, because of this intellectualism, Socrates would engage in conversation with anyone, whatever his moral character, and that his teaching could therefore easily lead to immorality. In addition, though Socrates criticized the traditional moral education of Athens, he lacked a positive moral program of his own. These charges, it has been argued, can all be truly made of Socrates as he is depicted in Plato's early dialogues.<sup>60</sup>

Yet even if we suppose that Socrates did literally think that *aretê* is a craft, we need not further believe that the crafts are purely intellectual activities, or that Socrates thought that they were. If *aretê* was a craft, then Socrates must have known that, like any craft, it could be learned only through an early beginning and after long training. Such training does not only impart knowledge; it also trains one's habits and dispositions. *Aretê*, moreover, could be a superordinate craft. It could involve not only knowledge of how to produce specific, independently given ends but also knowledge of which ends are good, which ends,

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59. In general terms, among others, by M.F. Burnyeat, Aristotle on Learning to be Good," in Amélie Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980) pp. 69-92. More specifically, by Martha C. Nussbaum, "Aristophanes and Socrates on Learning Practical Wisdom," *Yale Classical Studies*, 26 (1980), p. 43-97.

60. Cf. Nussbaum, "Aristophanes and Socrates," pp. 79-88. Kraut, SS, pp. 218-228, gives some persuasive arguments to the effect that Socrates was much less opposed to traditional moral education than is often supposed.

that is, ought to be produced. If this is so, then the mere analogy between *aretê* and the crafts is not sufficient to accuse Socrates of blind intellectualism.<sup>61</sup>

Socrates, we must now insist, did not make it his practice to engage in discussion indiscriminately. Plato is careful to show how he questioned only those who claimed to have knowledge of *aretê* and that he took pains to examine the moral qualities of the younger men he proposed to spend time with (*Ch.* 154e1). His *daimonion*, we are told, often prevented him from associating with particular individuals (*Theages* 129e ff.; cf. *Tht.* 151c).<sup>62</sup>

What cannot be denied is that, with the possible but unclear exception of the hedonism for which he may have argued in the *Protagoras*,<sup>63</sup> Socrates did not offer a program of positive moral education. But that he should have provided such a program is a view which presupposes that Socrates was in fact a moral educator. This presupposition, crudely made by Aristophanes, eventually becomes the assumption that Socrates was concerned to offer a general theory of virtue and happiness as well as a method for acquiring them. This assumption, in turn, is that he was, and that he should have been, a philosopher in the

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61. Cf. the discussion of M. J. O'Brien, *The Socratic Paradoxes and the Greek Mind* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), ch. 2.

62. This was also, of course, Xenophon's view of Socrates: *Mem.* I.ii, 2, vi. 5ff., vi. 13f., *Ap.* 16. W.C.K. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. III. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 39, writes that this is only Xenophon's, and not Plato's, view; but contrast vol. III. 2, p. 83. A careful examination of the evidence and an account of those passages in both Plato and Xenophon which suggest that Socrates was open to all is offered by David L. Blank, "Socratics Versus Sophists on Payment for Teaching," *California Studies in Classical Philology*, (1985), pp. 1-49, which also includes all the relevant testimonia. Blank argues that Socrates was not open to all. His own view, that Socrates chose his associates on the basis of an erotic attraction, though suggestive, is not developed in detail.

63. This has become an issue of serious dispute since Taylor, *Plato: "Protagoras,"* pp. 166-170, Irwin, *PMT*, ch. IV, and J.C.B. Grosling and C. C. W. Taylor, *The Greeks on Pleasure* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), chs. II, III attributed the hedonism discussed here to Socrates himself. *Contra* Donald Zeyl, "Socrates and Hedonism --*Protagoras* 351b-348d," *Phronesis*, 25 (1980), pp. 250-269.

mode of Plato when he wrote the *Republic* or of Aristotle when he wrote his various *Ethics*. The view, however, that it is essential for philosophers to offer general instructions for how to live the good life is deeply debatable. I want to resist it. In his early dialogues Plato makes Socrates explicitly insist, again and again, that he has no such instructions to offer and that he lacks the knowledge of what virtue is. I think that we should take his disavowals of knowledge very seriously indeed. And since Socrates is also made to insist that it is necessary to know what virtue is in order to teach people how to live well, I think that we must take his disavowal of the role of teacher or moral educator seriously as well (*Ap.* 19d8-e2, 23a 3-5; *La.* 200e1-201a1). If anything, Socrates often declares that he wants to become the pupil of whoever it might be who might have the knowledge in question (*Eu.* 5a3-67; *La.* 201a1-b5).

But isn't Socrates disavowal of knowledge and of his role as a teacher ironical? No, it is not, as Gregory Vlastos has conclusively shown.<sup>64</sup> Vlastos, however, believes that this creates a paradox, since he is convinced that Socrates claims, with equal seriousness, to possess the knowledge in question. Yet the vast majority of the passages in which Socrates unambiguously claims to have knowledge come from the *Gorgias* and *Republic* I, which mark the early stages of Plato's middle period. The early dialogues are much more equivocal on this issue. Vlastos himself writes that "the only place in Plato's earliest dialogues where Socrates avows flatly, without resort to indirection of any sort, that he knows a moral truth" is *Ap.* 29b6-7 which he translates as follows: "but that to do injustice and disobey my superior, god or man, this I know to be evil and base."<sup>65</sup>

We have already discussed this passage, and the possibility of translating ἀπειθεῖν as "not being convinced by" may now suggest that this is not after all such a substantive moral principle. How deeply inconsistent is Socrates when he claims, on the one hand, that he is "wise in nothing great or small" (*Ap.* 21b4-5) and that he "knows nothing noble and good" (*Ap.* 21d4) and, on the

64. Vlastos, SDK, pp. 2-5; cf. also his "Socratic Irony," unpublished manuscript, 1985.

65. Vlastos, SDK, pp. 6-7.

other, that he knows that injustice (whatever it turns out to be) is wrong? Surely the idea that injustice is wrong is quite conventional and non-controversial; it is Callicles who produces a novel and debatable view when he argues that it is not. Socrates' view is simply that, as he also argues in the *Crito* (47d7-48a11), if you are convinced by argument that a course of action is unjust you must not pursue it.

To think that Socrates' view that you should not do what you take to be unjust is inconsistent with his claim to lack moral knowledge depends, I think on a crucial presupposition. This is the idea that Socrates believes that you cannot recognize any action as unjust without knowing what justice is. Since, then, he clearly does not know this latter, he also, it would seem, cannot know the former. But the first part of this essay has been aimed at showing that Socrates does not believe that knowledge of virtue is necessary for knowledge that *some* particular action is virtuous, or for knowing that justice is a virtue, and injustice wrong. What Socrates would consider as knowledge of something "noble and good" is knowledge of the definition of justice, which would provide a standard for evaluating *every* action. This is knowledge which, indeed, he lacks. But this lack does not involve him in paradox.

Socrates, then, disavows the role of moral teacher in all seriousness, and we must believe him when he says so. He spent a large part of his life looking for such a teacher, in the hope (perhaps ironic) that if he found one then he, too, would *ipso facto* become virtuous and happy. He failed not only in finding such a teacher but also, at least as he is depicted in Plato's early dialogues, in being one himself. This, of course, was not a problem directly for him, since he would have been the first to acknowledge that the problems he raised for those who professed to teach what *aretê* is were problems for him as well: his sons never achieved excellence, he is not shown to have had a single distinguished disciple, and he never made up his own mind unconditionally about whether *aretê* could or could not be taught.<sup>66</sup> In the *Gorgias*, as we remarked already, Socrates

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66. The relevant texts and some comments are given in "Meno's Paradox and Socrates as a Teacher," pp. 11-12, 14.



claims that Pericles failed to make the Athenians good since they eventually prosecuted him and almost sentenced him to death (515e10-516a3). But doesn't this argument apply even more directly to Socrates himself, who, "toward the end of his life" (G. 516a1 with *Ap.* 38c5-7), was not nearly but actually and horribly executed by his own countrymen?

Was Socrates then a complete failure?<sup>67</sup> Failed as a teacher, since he is not shown to have made anyone else good, and failed as a student, since he never discovered what the virtues are, we might say that he should attract our attention only for some specific innovations in moral thought which he may have introduced or for the uniqueness of his character.<sup>68</sup> But in saying this, and in making his character the object of our concern, we have given ourselves a whole new dimension against which to measure his moral and philosophical stature.

In Plato's early dialogues, Socrates finds no teachers and no students worthy of him. The key words here are "worthy of him." For despite his failure, Plato's Socrates is still depicted as the best of men:

No man ever breathed greater assurance that his feet were planted firmly on the path of right. He never voices a doubt of the moral rightness of any of his acts or decision, never betrays a sense of sin. He goes to his death confident that "no evil thing can happen to a good man" (*Apology* 41d) -- that "good man" is himself.<sup>69</sup>

Vlastos' description of Socrates' sense of himself is just right. Now this is the sense of himself Socrates is depicted to have in the Platonic dialogues, and it is reflected and encapsulated in the closing words of the *Phaedo*: he was the best, the wisest, and the most just man of his generation (118a16-17). This description, therefore, necessarily gets Plato's view of Socrates and of Socrates' sense of himself just right as well. And here, I think, we may find the beginnings of a solution to our problem.

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67. An interestingly equivocal answer to this question is offered by Vlastos, PS, pp. 15-21. His view, I think, depends on taking Socrates to be a positive moral teacher.

68. Vlastos, PS, pp. 18-19.

69. Vlastos, PS, p. 7.

Being convinced that virtue was either identical with or very closely related to knowledge, Socrates spent a great part of his life trying to acquire that knowledge. Though he seemed to have failed in his quest, he still, however, lived the life of someone who appeared to possess the virtues and who also, therefore, must in some way or another (if his view was at all correct) have possessed the knowledge in question.

More importantly, this shows that Socrates was after all recognized as a virtuous man and, despite his own disclaimers, as having come the closest to being the very moral expert for whom he had always been looking in others. That is, Socrates did in the end have a student who recognized him as virtuous. If the argument of this essay is at all correct, this recognition depended on the student becoming convinced of at least many of his teacher's views. And if the recognition of a virtuous agent is, as I have argued, a mutual affair, that student must have claimed to be at least as expert in matters of morality as his own teacher. This student is, of course, just the one whom we never see depicted in the dialogues and who constantly describes the failure of others to see Socrates for what he was, or for what he at least took him to be. His absence as a character in the dialogues allows him never to have to make his claim to expertise explicit, but his presence as their author compels him to issue it whenever they are read.

What Plato saw in Socrates has by now become for most of us Socrates himself. But what did he see? He saw a man who placed the pursuit of a knowledge or wisdom he thought he lacked at the very center of his life and who, in pursuing that wisdom succeeded in living a virtuous life and, to that extent, in exhibiting the very knowledge he claimed not to have.

Socrates offered to teach no one, since he believed he had nothing to teach. He did not even claim to provide an example for others, as Xenophon at least occasionally realized. For in the passage which serves as epigraph to this essay he writes only that Socrates' mode of life made others hope that if they lived as he did they would become like him, not that he ever set himself up as their model (but contrast *Mem.* I.ii. 8, 18, 48). In one of the most famous passages of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (II 2. 1103b26-29), Aristotle claims that the goal of moral inquiry is not

simply knowledge, but possession, of *aretê*. Yet it was just the pursuit of knowledge which led Socrates to do, habitually, the right thing. The charge of intellectualism is defused when we take Socrates at his word and do not consider him as someone who offered a method for becoming good.

Nevertheless, Socrates was virtuous and yet he had no explanation of that fact. And neither did Plato until he began to consider that the elenchus could be taken positively as well as negatively, that it could be a method for acquiring knowledge as well as a means for removing ignorance.<sup>70</sup> What he had to explain was how one could learn from Socrates even if Socrates had nothing to teach. And he connected this with the view that the knowledge Socrates was looking for is already within us, capable of being recollected perhaps by all (as he may have thought at M. 85c10-12) or perhaps only by some (as he came to think in the *Republic*).<sup>71</sup> Plato, who was a moral educator if anyone ever was, took it as his task to make sure that Socrates' influence on him, or what he took that influence to be, would no longer be a matter of chance and accident. He also wanted to make sure that moral *aretê* would never again result in the disgraceful treatment Socrates received from his compatriots. On the contrary, he tried to describe a state in which moral *aretê* would necessarily bring along the public honor and recognition more traditional conceptions of *aretê* had always involved. Knowledge, virtue, and reputation were no longer to diverge from one another. To that end, Plato began to articulate the structure of the knowledge necessary for virtue so that it could be acquired systematically. He turned his attention to the project of identifying, as early as possible, those who were capable of acquiring that knowledge and, with it, *aretê* and genuine *eudaimonia* as well.

It is true that Plato's project, like Aristotle's, involves paying much greater attention to character than Socrates ever did. But Plato

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70. Here I rely on Vlastos, "The Socratic Elenchus," and on his "Afterthoughts on the Socratic Elenchus," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 1(1983), pp. 71-74. I particularly have in mind his statement that his main evidence for construing the elenchus positively comes from the *Gorgias* (p. 74 n. 8).

71. Cf. "Meno's Paradox and Socrates as a Teacher," pp. 29-30; Vlastos, "The Socratic Elenchus," pp. 55-57.

had to do so, because his views were addressed directly to all. Even when Socrates admits that he had a mission in Athens, his essentially individualist bent is unmistakable: the greatest benefit he has conferred on his city, he says, has been his effort to convince everyone that one must "cultivate oneself" (ἐαυτοῦ ἐπιμελεῖσθαι) before anything else (*Ap.* 38c3-7). Perhaps such "cultivation" consists only in intellectual activity, but, in his case at least, such intellectual activity led to *aretê*. Plato, by contrast, wants to improve everyone's lot directly and he assigns every citizen a clear position in his new system. He wants to teach everyone, and needs docile or at least willing and cooperative students. He gives rules for saving everybody's soul.<sup>72</sup> But behind these rules there lurks the solitary pursuer of knowledge for its own or, what may come to the same thing, for his own sake, who may not have worried about character because he already had the right habits and desires. It is in fact remarkable to what extent the life of Socrates, combining the search for knowledge with moral virtue, remains the ideal to which both Plato's and Aristotle's, not to mention many later, moral philosophies aspire. Socrates may have never learned nor taught how to save another's soul. Is this a criticism? Or might it be the key to understanding how he may just possibly have saved his own?

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72. I use the term "rules" in a loose sense, in light of Gisela Striker's "On the Greek Origins of the Concept of Natural Law," in this volume, pp. 79 ff.